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Walk for Shea

April 27 event raises money for Spinal Muscular Atrophy research.

By **Bonnie Hobbs, Centre View**
Thursday, April 17, 2008

It's not everywhere that a girl and her dog get to lead a parade. But that's what happens in Centreville, the last Sunday in April of each year, during the Walk for Shea.

Virginia Run's Shea Megale, now 12 1/2, is among the one in every 6,000 babies born with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). And the annual walk held in her community helps raise money toward a cure for her and others like her who have this rare form of muscular dystrophy.

This year's "Walk for Shea," the 11th annual, will be held Sunday, April 27, at 9 a.m., rain or shine. It begins at the Virginia Run Community Center, at Pleasant Valley Road and Wetherburn Court, off Route 29 in Centreville.

Register at www.walkforshea.com. Cost is \$6, adults and \$4, children under 18; children under 2 are free; strollers and friendly dogs are welcome.

"What's so baffling to us is that, after all these years, people's interest in the walk hasn't waned," said Shea's mom, Megan Megale. "Every year, it gets bigger."

Some 650 people participated in last year's walk, which raised \$26,000, and organizer Mo Nieves hopes this year's event will attract even more people. But, like Megale, she's delighted that they continue giving it their support.

A seventh-grader at Stone Middle School, Shea will lead the walk with her companion dog Mercer, along with family and friends. But as far as she's concerned, the event proceeds are for other children — especially those not fortunate to have wheelchairs.

Shea's the youngest of Megan and Larry Megale's three children and is sunny, cheerful and smart. Her dad's an engineer with Blackbird Technologies and assistant coaches Westfield High's girls varsity lacrosse team. Her mom describes herself as the family's cook and cleaner and Shea's publicist.

That's because Shea is already an accomplished author, having written two books about "Marvelous Mercer," with their proceeds also going toward SMA research.

"It's wonderful to be affiliated with the charity," said Megan Megale. "And it's an exciting year for us, in conjunction with the money being raised by Shea's book. Now, we're really seeing all these efforts pay off."

Mercer, a 6-year-old black Labrador, came from Canine Companions for Independence, which trains dogs from birth and places them with people with disabilities. Then each dog is trained specifically to meet its new owner's individual needs.

He and Shea are best buds; Mercer sleeps in her bed and even showers with her. "Last week she was sick, and he laid in bed with her all week," said her mom. "He's awesome."

At school, Mercer snoozes under Shea's desk. But whenever she commands him, he springs into action, ready to do whatever task she needs. Mercer opens doors for her, turns on lights, picks up anything she drops and carries her backpack.

"She loves Stone and is having a great experience there," said Megan Megale. Added Shea: "The teachers are wonderful and I'm definitely enjoying all my classes."



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She also enjoys swimming and has water therapy, plus physical therapy, every week. She loves traveling, too, visiting relatives in New York, plus playing lacrosse with her dad and siblings.

When she's not busy playing with Mercer, Shea likes gardening, baking cookies with her mom and making crafts — painting, coloring and making gifts. And she likes all types of music "except for rap and heavy metal."

Shea's also looking forward to the upcoming walk. "I'm excited — I like to see everybody," she said.

Besides being a pleasant, family outing for a good cause, the annual Walk for Shea also helps raise public awareness about SMA. One in every 40 people carries the gene that causes it. That means the child of two carriers has a 1 in 4 chance of developing this disease.

Those who can't participate in the walk, but would like to contribute toward a cure, may send checks payable to Shea Megale Fund Corp., c/o Walk for Shea, 6302 Rockbridge Place, Centreville, VA 20120.



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